WHO AM I?

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A social critic stresses the complications of the long, sometimes arduous, but necessary "journey into self."

Who are you? You singly, not you together. When did it start—that long day's journey into self? When do you really begin to know what you believe and where you're going? When do you know that you are unique—separate—alone?

The time of discovery is different for everybody. Some people find themselves in early childhood, some in middle-age, some—the tragic ones—never.

I suggest that the first recognition comes when others try to tell you what you are. And although what happened in my generation is supposed to have no relevance to what happens in yours, I know when it happened to me.

I may have been six years old when aunts and uncles and cousins used to say: "You look just like your mother!" or "You're the image of your brother!"

Now, for reasons that have nothing to do with duty or discipline in that distant day, I loved my family. I loved them because they were interesting, handsome, talented, and loving people. I was lucky. But in spite of that, I felt an immediate, instinctive resistance to any suggestion that I was like them or like anybody else. I didn't want to be like anybody else. I was Me. Myself. Separate. Alone.

This is probably as good a time as any to say that if I use the first-person pronoun—if I refer from time to time to my own long, arduous, bumbling journey into self—it is not because of narcissism, but because I have always believed that the particular is more illuminating than the general. Perhaps my dependence as a writer on direct observation rather than on scholarly research, on living example rather than on sociological method, is the natural result of illiter-

acy. I never went to college and therefore know much less than you people do. About books, I mean. Or the sciences.

But since the laboratory for the study of man is clearly life itself, then I have studied hard in the act of living, of looking, of feeling; involvement rather than detachment; doing as well as being.

We were talking of the first discoveries of uniqueness—of being oneself and no one else. Not your father, not your mother, not your sister, not your brother. I. Me.

It is then—when you begin not only to know it, but act it—that society moves in. Society says it wants people to be different but it doesn't really mean it. Parents like to believe their children are different from other children—smarter, of course, better-looking and so forth—but most parents are secretly disturbed when their children are *really* different—not like others at all. In fact, very early they start to pigeonhole you in certain ways.

Take the difference of sex, for instance. Little girls are pink, little boys are blue. Little girls want dolls, little boys want trains.

For a long time, for instance, the word "tom-boy" to a girl held undertones of worry and disapproval. All it meant was that the girl liked to play ball, climb trees, and skin her knees instead of wearing frilly dresses and curtseying. The companion word for boys, of course, was "sissy"—meaning the kid liked music and poetry and hated fighting. These ignorant and damaging labels have now been discredited, thanks largely to you and the more enlightened members of our society. But there is still, alas, a large Squareland left where growing girls are told from the age of twelve onward not only by their mothers but by the mass media that marriage is the only valid female goal and that Career is a dirty word.

Even now—even when you here know how silly it is (at least, I hope you do), most parents hear wedding bells the minute a girl is born, most parents see an executive office when a boy is born, and the relentless conditioning starts on its merry way. Educate a girl for the marriage market, educate a boy for success. That you, as a human being, as a separate identity, may not want or fit in with either of these goals is considered not a sign of independence but of deviation—pointing to the couch or—in social terms—failure.

That is why these same parents—and they are still a majority—are bewildered, depressed, or plain horrified when their adolescents openly refuse to accept these goals or to share any common identity with any past. Who on earth, their parents moan, will marry this stringy girl with her false eyelashes and shuffling gait? Who will employ this bearded boy with his grunts and records, his pop and pot? On the other end, how gratified are parents when their clean-cut athletic sons get high marks and their clean and pretty daughters marry the clean-cut boys who get good jobs?

You know, I pity you. I pity you for reasons you might not suspect. I pity you because your search for self has been made so self-conscious. You are overexposed in and by the mass media, which never for one instant night and day stop telling you what you are and who you are. With us, decades ago, there was no radio and no television. As adolescents we seldom read papers (they never reported on us) or magazines. The word "teenager," thank God, never existed. From twelve to seventeen we were painful to our parents and not very attractive to ourselves. Our skins and bodies did strange things and we felt strange things. The world paid no attention to us. It didn't interview us, quote us, and ask our advice. We didn't expect it to. We had twenty-five to fifty cents a week to spend for allowance (rich kids got a dollar), but who needed it? Books were in the house or you could borrow them, movies were a quarter, and if you were lucky your family took you to occasional plays or concerts. School was sometimes boring, but we expected it to be. Nobody told us learning ought to be fun. When it was—well, great!

Nothing much external happened, except for trips with the family and meetings with friends. There was a lot of unfilled, unstructured, unplanned free time—with no messages coming in from anywhere to distract us, no entertainment at arm's length, no guidance counselors or psychiatrists to tell us what was bugging us. We had a vast amount of inner space to fill by ourselves. In this inner space there was room and time for that very tender, very vulnerable thing called "I" to be born—and grow.

For there are really two births—the first physical, the second spiritual. Both share something in common: Premature expulsion, premature exposure, can damage both foetus and soul. The prenatal fluid that protects the foetus

until it is ready for air has its counterpart in the secret world of the yet unborn identity.

Now I want to make it quite clear that this secret world of child and adolescent is not a matter of protection from reality. Just because a child may grow up in the relative security of home and school and neighborhood doesn't mean that the human comedy-tragedy is not a part of daily life. You are not cut off from experience because the world you live in is physically small. On the contrary, you can be put off from real experience because the world has become too large.

And that is precisely why I pity you. You stand naked and exposed in too large a world, and that prenatal sac of your soul has been so repeatedly punctured by external influences, persuasions, and pressures that it must take superhuman will to keep yourself intact. Many of you don't. Or at least you find the only answer to a fragmented self in a fragmented life—or a withdrawal from life.

How, in any case, are you ever going to know what you are or who you are when these hundreds of voices are doing the job *for* you? How do you know how much of what you think and do is what you *really* think and want to do, or how much is the feedback from what you hear about yourselves—daily, hourly? A lot of it, of course, is true.

You *are* the new power, if only in numbers. You *are* rich, if only in dollars. You *are* smarter than your parents, if only in acquired knowledge. A lot of you take drugs and pills or cop out in communal huddles, living on handouts. I question whether you are more interested in sex than we were, or even more active. The difference here is that it's now so easy to come by, in beds as well as in books, that it may mean less. Obstacles are great aphrodisiacs.

I would like to think that those of you who hate war are a majority. I would like to think that those of you who believe that sweeping changes must be made in our whole social, legal, political and economic life are a majority and an acting majority at that.

Whatever you are, you can't do anything about making a better society and a better world until you are a productive human being. And you can't be a productive human being, sorting the world out, until you sort yourself out.

Until you really attain an expansion of consciousness—not of another world, through hallucination, but of this

world, through illumination. Not long ago Professor Lettwin, that dynamic, free-wheeling bear of M.I.T., told an audience of high-school students and undergraduates in Boston that in order to do what they wanted to do—to change the disastrous drift of society—they would have to keep their wits about them. You must be conscious, he exhorted, you must at all times keep your sense of judgment intact. Anything that blurs, that weakens your judgmental values will, in time, make you ineffective. Only your judgment, consciously arrived at, only the intellect and senses in the service of human compassion—will take you where you want to go—where this new society *must* go.

This I would also passionately advocate. As a long-time rebel, a seeker of new adventures, a destroyer of old myths, I have come to believe that this total awareness is the greatest single attribute of identity, and most preciously to be guarded. That it can be chemically achieved I would very much doubt. For moments, maybe. For the long haul, no. It is one thing—and who doesn't need it?—to seek escape from the pain of total awareness—in drink or pot. It is another to take the quick exit from reality with the distinct possibility that you may not make the reentry back. Or that if you do, you may never be yourself—your real, your useful, your creative self—again. Fly Now—Pay Later.

The price of conscious awareness is stiff—but not that stiff. The price is a very hard look at yourself—alone, and not bolstered by a crowd, a tribe—or even—a wife. And here is where I'm going to stick this already battered neck further out—on the institution of matrimony.

Your parents, I would imagine, consider your generation incomprehensible, sometimes frightening, and certainly unconventional. Everything you wear, grow on your face or head, think, believe, do, is way out of their norm.

Except marriage. In a world of undreamed-of scope and opportunity and choice, most of you do exactly what your parents did in a much more limited world. You rush to the altar to tie the legal tie from the age of eighteen onward to a girl no older. Here you are in the full flower of body and mind (and I speak of both sexes) and with the only pure freedom of action you will ever know again, and you tie yourself to one mate and one hearth before you know who you are.

If you're lucky, you will find yourselves *through* each

other—the ideal nature of love, the true—and rare—blessing of marriage.

If you're not lucky—and the evidence would call you a majority—you will be two half-persons, half-grown, prematurely bound, inhibiting each other's growth, choking up the road to your full development as a human being.

Many of our laws and institutions, as you well know, have not yet caught up with reality . . . the fact that men and women cannot be codified. So long as we do others no harm, how we choose to live is our own affair, and ours alone. How *you* choose to live is yours alone. And if you are able to bring about an intelligent society—I avoid the word "great"—one of the most important things you will have to do is remove the senseless stigmas that still prevail against single men or single women, and against whatever kind of love is the product of deep inner need.

One of your great influences already is that in your new sense of community—in part forced upon you by isolation from your elders—you have managed to blur already many of the lines of demarcation—between races, between sexes, between thought and feeling, between feeling and action—which have trapped the former generations in patterns of sterility. The best of you have not only discovered your conscience, but are living it.

But apart from the terrible issues of the day—to which the best of you address your conscience—war in Vietnam, the brutal war in the streets—how much are you living it as individuals, how much in group conformity?

How brave, how independent are you when you are alone? I ask this chiefly of my own sex, for I wonder whether girls now really know and want the chances and choices that are open to them, or whether they have been so conditioned by history and habit that they slip back into the old patterns of their mothers the minute they graduate. Oddly enough, this supposed choice between marriage and a career never bothered my generation as much as it seems to have bothered the postwar ones. And I lay the blame for it on a mass media—mainly television, advertising, and women's magazines—which maintain the fiction that the only valid goal for women is marriage and children and domesticity (with a little community work thrown in), and that women who demand and seek more than this from life are at best unfulfilled and at worst unfeminine. It is about time that we real-

ized that many women make better teachers than mothers, better actresses than wives, better mistresses than housekeepers, better diplomats than cooks. Just as many men are better rakes than lawnmowers and better dreamers than providers. We have lost a great deal of talent and wasted a great many lives in the perpetuation of these myths that are called "the role of men" or "the role of women." And just as you have managed to dissipate some of them in your dress, I hope you will dissipate others in your lives. The only thing you need to aspire to, the only ultimate identity you must discover, is that of a human being. The sex, believe it or not, is secondary.

But in the search for this human identity, I urge you to remember one thing. I said before that our first recognition of it comes when we know we are not like anybody else, that we are unique. That is so.

But we did not spring into this world through galactic explosion—we did not even burst from the head of Zeus.

We came from somewhere. Not just the womb of our mothers and the seeds of our fathers but from a long, long procession of identities—whose genes we possess.

Whether we like it or not, we bear the past inside us. Good or bad, it cannot be excised, it cannot be rejected, . . . it should not be. Humanity is a continuous process, and without a past there is no future.

In your worship of Now, in your fierce insistence that only the present exists, that you are new on the face of the earth, owing nothing to history—you are cheating yourself. You are not only denying evolution but limiting your future.

You may say you have nothing in common with the preceding generation, you may lay the blame for the present entirely on their shoulders and on the mistakes of the past. But what of the others who came before? What of the great rebels, the great innovators, the great voices without which no light, no truth would ever have prevailed? Much of what poets and philosophers and artists and scientists said ten centuries ago is as valid now as it was then. Where would you be, where would we be, without them?

On a much humbler level, I remember the photograph albums so many families kept when I was a child. There, in our own, were these strange faces and strange clothes of the dead who preceded me: the tall, gaunt old baker in Poland, the opera singer in Germany, the immigrant fur-

niture dealer in New York, the violinist in Breslau, the General near Kiel, the incredible web of cells and genes contained in my own self.

It took me more than twenty years to realize that they lived in me, that I was part of them, and that in spite of distance, time, and difference, I was part of them. I was not, in short, alone.

And neither are you. I suppose what I am asking for here is that, along with your pride of generation, you somehow maintain compassion for those who preceded you as well as for those who will come after you.

If you will, this is a community just as important as any living community of your own age and time, and if you deny your connection with it, you deny evolution, you deny the human race.

Don't play it too cool. The ultimate pattern of life is immense, there are other worlds in other galaxies that may have far transcended ours, and if you aren't turned on more by a shower of meteors than by an electric circus, you're half dead already.

You won't find yourself in a crowded room. You may find yourself under the crowded sky of night, where—if you attach yourself to a single star—you will discover that you are one of many millions, but still—One.

Listen to your own drum and march to it. You may fall on your face—but then, anybody who never does is—Nobody!